



## Leader self-development as organizational strategy

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### ABSTRACT

Leader self-development enables leaders to adapt to the continually changing environment both within and outside of the organization. The purpose of this paper is to describe the construct of leader self-development and the processes by which it can serve as an organizational leadership development strategy. We framed the paper around a multi-level model of leader self-development linking organizational level constructs such as human resources practices and resources with group level phenomena of norms, supervisor style, and social networks with the individual leader self-development process. Leader self-development is a cost-effective way for organizations to develop leaders resulting in competitive edge.

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### 1. Introduction

*In times of changes, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.* Eric Hoffer

In today's ever-increasing high-tech, global environment, organizations must constantly adapt in order to succeed and survive. Many organizations have turned to formal leader development programs to meet this challenge, budgeting \$51.1 billion for formal organizational training (Training, 2005) with over \$30 billion aimed toward managerial training (Training, 2000). However, the return on investment of formal leader development programs may not adequately prepare leaders for tomorrow's challenges (Avolio et al., 2009). A study by Hewitt Associates (2003) suggests that organizations that fail to align their leader development programs with their business goals and objectives lag behind the "Top 20 Companies for Leaders" in effective leadership programs, high-potential leader development, and senior-level support. In the time it takes to design and implement a formal content-specific leader development program, the needs of the organization may have changed due to dynamic environmental factors. Thus, even those organizations with well-developed leader development programs are at risk of falling behind the curve in preparing leaders.

Although investing in human resources is likely a key to success (Pfeffer, 1994), organizations need different, more cost effective, and adaptive strategies for developing leaders. One approach is to implement leader self-development as organizational strategy. Self-development translates into an enhanced ability to solve problems quickly and generate creative ideas that support organizational adaptability and growth (Phillips, 1993). Thus, learning organizations composed of self-directed learners who are inclined to self-develop have an edge over the competition (Antonacopoulou, 2000). Not only does leader self-development enable organizations to keep up with the dynamics of a changing environment (Antonacopoulou, 2000), but it is also a cost-effective way of developing human resources (Temporal, 1984). However, for leader self-development to be a successful organizational strategy, it must be aligned with

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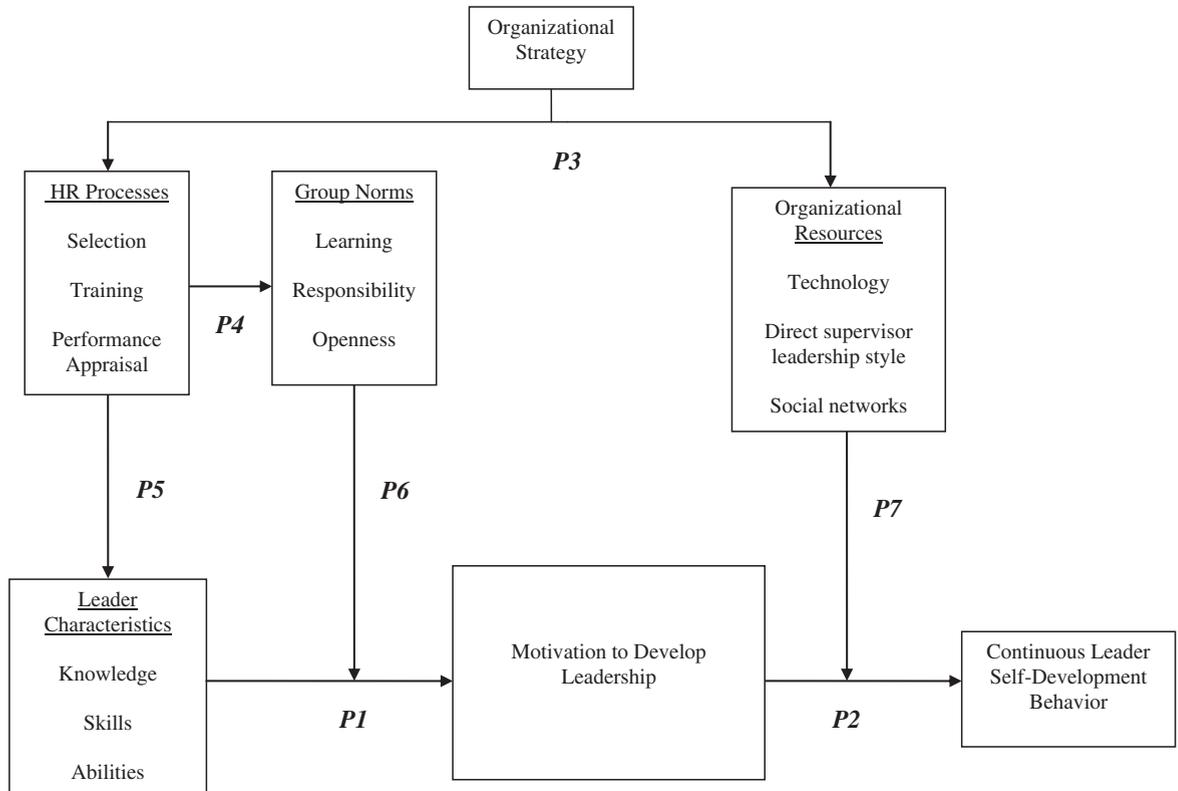
multiple organizational and group level practices. This paper adds to previous research on leadership development and organizational strategy by clearly defining the construct of leader self-development and discussing the influences on leader self-development at three levels of analyses (the target individual, the individual's group, and the organization as a whole).

1.1. Leader self-development model

The proposed theoretical model describes how individuals are transformed into continuous self-developers (Fig. 1). Specifically, this process is influenced by factors operating at the individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis. By examining all three of these levels of analyses, we offer a comprehensive model for understanding how individuals can be transformed into continuous learners within the organizational context. Further, such an examination provides leverage points at the organization and group levels for eliciting such behaviors. We begin this paper by defining leader self-development and then exploring the individual-level characteristics that may predispose one to self-development. In addition, we will describe the individual-level outcomes of self-development behaviors and motivation to develop. Next, we describe the group-level and organization-level antecedents of leader self-development, and how these interact with each other, and the leader's characteristics to achieve self-development outcomes. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of how these individual leader development outcomes can result in overall leadership development for the organization in terms of organizational adaptability or absorptive capacity.

2. Leader self-development

In defining leader self development, Day's (2000) distinction between the concepts of leader development and leadership development is important because we argue that when an organization's strategy supports leader self-development the result is not only an increase in individual leader capacity but also the organization's leadership capacity as a whole. As Day noted, leader development focuses on individual-level development, such as the knowledge, skills, and abilities required by formal leadership roles. Leader development usually takes the form of formal training, job rotation, or off-site workshops where the instructor or coordinator of the program determines what and how the leader will learn. In contrast, leadership development involves building social capital, including networked relationships among employees. Leadership development emphasizes building and using interpersonal competence. To sum up, while leader development focuses on an individual level process of building human capital, leadership development expands the collective capacity of employees and the building of social capital. Using this framework, the



Note. P refers to Proposition.

Fig. 1. Multilevel model of leader self-development. Note. P refers to proposition.

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